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SUBJECT: Hesse SPD Self-Destructs as Minority Government Attempt Fails

REF: Frankfurt 2701; Frankfurt 2853

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Three Hesse SPD parliamentarians torpedoed state party leader Andrea Ypsilanti's plan for an SPD-Green minority government with the support of The Left. The last-minute defections weaken the SPD as it strains to show party unity in an upcoming election year. The CDU stays in power for now in Hesse and new elections in the coming months appear likely, which will in all most probably be disastrous for the SPD as it attempts to recover from its unpopular power grab and the devastating back-stabbing in its ranks. SPD national Chairperson Franz Muentefering summed it up cogently when he told the Tagesspiegel November 3, "For my party, what happened is not good." End Summary.

Dissenters Bring Down Minority Government Attempt

¶2. (SBU) The three dissenters (joined by one who had expressed her dissent early on in March, 2008) said their last-minute change of heart was due to a crisis of conscience on cooperating with the Left Party, which they argued in part speaks for extreme-left ideas and the ideology of the former GDR. The state parliament was scheduled to vote on the election of the SPD-Green government November 4, but the defections have left the SPD, Greens and Left short three votes of a needed majority. Coming two days after delegates at a SPD state convention had approved the government coalition agreement by 95.8%, the defections were an extreme and unexpected shock that leave its future under Chairperson Andrea Ypsilanti unclear. Muentefering and party Chancellor candidate FM Frank-Walter Steinmeier were never fans of Ypsilanti's plan, assessing that it could hurt the national party in an election year.

¶3. (U) The failed attempt to form a government was the second for the SPD since the January 2008 election. The decision of the three provoked strong outrage within the party as it came so late in the process and went against the wishes of a large majority of party members. Muentefering also spoke out against the defections saying the party board was shocked and indignant. Leaving aside his concerns about Ypsilanti's course, he said he found it strange and not credible that the three parliamentarians discovered their conscience one day before the actual vote.

Aftermath: SPD Down, CDU on the Rebound

¶4. (SBU) New elections appear to be the only way out of Hesse's current political deadlock. The Greens, now burned by their experience with the SPD, may vote along with the CDU and FDP to call for one as early as November 18. A new election would have to take place in two months. The results would probably be disastrous for the SPD, as the minority government attempt was unpopular among the electorate and the party in-fighting has further damaged its image. In a September poll, the SPD stood at 28% (down 9% from election night), while the CDU (39%) and FDP (12%) were seemingly in shooting distance of a majority. (Comment: Such weak results so close before national elections (September 27, 2009) could erode the SPD's

standing in the polls, which had finally stabilized and even improved slightly after the September change in leadership. End comment.)

¶5. (U) Ypsilanti has so far made no indication that she will step down as chairperson, but a power struggle within the SPD appears likely given the recent events. While the four dissenters probably will not have much of a future within the party and may face disciplinary action, a more moderate, fresh figure would seemingly give the SPD better chances in an election.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: If state politics are Germany's political laboratory, the Hesse SPD's botched experiment has revealed the fissures between the party's right and left wings as it copes with the challenge of the Left Party. This incident will heighten the exasperation of the national leadership with the SPD's inability to project an image of being calm, disciplined and in-control. This will be a key task in 2009. Meanwhile, Hesse Minister President Roland Koch has proven once again to be a cat with nine lives as he emerges the winner, standing by and watching Ypsilanti, his main rival, not only fail to unseat him but be destroyed politically by dissent within her own party.

¶7. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
POWELL